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ABSTRACT

Techniques of teaching the English finite verb to speakers of other languages must account for meaning that is signalled by the structure alone and meaning derived from the context. Accordingly, this study attempts to distinguish the semantic components of the finite verb structure. The structure is viewed as being always composed of the following elements of meaning: (1) the lexical meaning of the verb base, and (2) the semantic component from each of five binary oppositions, that is, the presence or absence of a given modifier. The opposition "be-ing" and the absence of "be-ing" (BE-ING--- O sub 1) carries aspectual meaning. BE-ING is a grammatical device to make all verbs dynamic. The absence of BE-ING, (O sub 1), presents the event synoptically; it marks only the existence of the referent. The O sub 1 is a grammatical device to make all verbs static. Interpretations such as limited, relative duration, repetition, instantaneousness, or general truth can be arrived at through many possible considerations, such as logical meaning of BE-ING or O sub 1, context, co-text, the lexical meaning of the verb-base, and the speaker's factual knowledge.
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THE ENGLISH VERB SYSTEM

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" People habitually choose their words, and associate them as context for each other, with sufficient skill so that each knocks out enough unwanted references from others, and what little survives from the original possible importations of each word can co-operate with those surviving from the other words to constitute a useful message. "

M. Joos, The English Verb: Form and Meaning, 1964.

The English finite verb system is one of the most difficult areas for both the teacher and the student of English as a foreign language. It is therefore of primary importance that the presentation of verb forms facilitates the process of learning as much as possible. This requires a coherent description of the English finite verb.

Existing sources for teaching and learning the verb appear to leave much room for improvement. They largely borrow from descriptive linguistic analyses of English, repeating their frequent misconceptions of the meaning of the finite verb. So these sources may, and often do, create in the learner's mind false assumptions about the verb system in English. Consider the following:

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The Present Perfect [1]

Four related uses of the present perfect may be noted:

A State leading up to the present time

That house has been empty for ages.

B Indefinite event(s) in a period leading up to the present time

Have you (ever) been to Florence ?

All my family have had measles (in the last year).

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C Habit in a period leading up to the present time

He has attended lectures regularly (this term).

D Past event with results in the present time

The taxi has arrived (i.e., 'It's now here')

Her doll has been broken (i.e., 'It's still not mended')

(Compare : Her doll was broken, but now it's mended).

Although the above way of presenting verb forms makes excessive reference to the so called uses of the forms, it leaves the learner no wiser so far as selecting appropriate verb forms under given circumstances is concerned. For example, no one can argue that a sentence like 'He has attended lectures regularly (this term) ' refers to a habit leading up to the present time. But not every habitual event in a period leading up to the present time will be necessarily referred to using a perfect form (e.g., 'I am going to college by bus this term'). Similarly, 'Her doll has been broken' does not have to suggest that the doll is still broken, nor does 'Her doll was broken' always imply that the doll has already been repaired. Likewise it is possible to say about a taxi which is now here that 'It has arrived' or 'It arrived just now', i.e., the fact that the taxi is now here is not per se the reason for choosing the perfect form rather than the simple past.

However, this is exactly what the learner who is confronted with statements like the above will try to do. It is plausible to believe that, before selecting a given verb form, he will thoroughly examine the nature of the event he wants to refer to; in other words, in order to choose a verb form he will first try to find out, for example, whether the event is or is not a state, whether it is or is not habitual, whether it has or has not produced any results, and so on.
He will not always be incorrect in his choice of the form, for in many cases the nature of the event and the meaning which the form (in a given context) signals do correspond. Yet he will not always be right: not even the aspect in language serves to reflect the nature of events.[2] Thus the learner will falsely assume that language, and verb forms in particular, mirror the universe whereas, as Uldal (1967) rightly observes, language conveys only our interpretation of the universe. "It is therefore not possible to give rules about which tense should be used on what occasion but only about which tense-unit to use if you choose to

regard an event in a certain way."

On close examination, any presentation of verb forms in terms of their uses does not tell the learner anything about the verb forms themselves. Rather it specifies various contextual environments in which forms appear in actual speech. Take, for instance,

1. The house has been empty for ages.
2. Have you(ever) been to Florence ?

In spite of the fact that the lexical verb and its grammatical form are identical in both sentences, 1 refers to a state leading up to the present time, whereas 2 presents an indefinite event in the period leading up to the present time. This demonstrates that the difference in implication cannot and should not be attributed to the form of the verb: it is brought about instead by the different contexts in which the form appears. The most immediate context for any verb form is always the lexical meaning of the verb chosen (and lexical meanings of modals whenever these are present). Here the verb is BE followed by 'empty' in 1 and by 'to Florence' in 2. It is interesting to observe that 'be empty' always refers to a state while 'be to Florence' refers to a single indefinite event. This, however, we infer from the factual knowledge of the real world and not because of the verb form used. Notice also that

3. He has attended lectures regularly (this term).

deals with a habit leading up to the present time, whereas

4. He has attended lectures (this term)

does not.

Undoubtedly, it is only the change of an adverb that shifts the use of the perfect from C to B of the Present Perfect subdivision. Furthermore, since the uses the subdivision mentions are entirely dependent on the context, it seems one must look for a unitary meaning of the perfect form itself, which meaning would be compatible with all those contextual implications.

Apart from the lexical meaning of the verb, the co-text and the reliance on the factual knowledge of the language user, there is always cross-referencing between what is being said and the whole context of situation. The full use of the significance of that environment is subconsciously internalised by the native speaker in the early stages of his language acquisition. He comes to know how to creatively combine semantic components carried by language structure with those semantic components in the structure's context.

This enables him to form and understand meaningful and grammatical sentences which he has never heard or formed before. Yet at the same time he will always find it difficult to consciously dissociate contextual influence from pure meaning of the structure. In short, to him semantic components of the elements of language structure are always fused with the environment in which they occur.

Consequently context constitutes a trap for the speaker of English when he attempts to describe the meaning of the English verb forms, and he is likely to attribute to those forms meanings which they do not signal at all. In the field of TEFL this unfortunate phenomenon greatly distorts the learner's appreciation of the balance between the amount of meaning signalled by the structure and that derived, often by way of reasoning, from the context. The recognition of an appropriate context for a given structure is one of the most difficult tasks for the foreign language speaker. In modern teaching techniques there is therefore an accepted trend towards contextualisation. But it is not enough to merely teach structures in context, hoping that the learner will himself arrive at the interrelation between the two. For him to made aware of contextual significance, it must, apparently, be carefully pointed out to him.

Of all the false assumptions stemming from modern techniques of teaching the verb, perhaps the most important is the assumption that the finite verb forms in English are the grammatical expressions of time. The unfortunate labels given to the 16 different verb forms have long been proved inadequate and confusing, so this subject does not require any detailed mention. But consider the following:

> The basic meaning of the simple past tense is to denote definite past time, <u>ie</u> what took place at a given time or in a given period before the present moment.[2]

Clearly the false assumption now in question is brought about not only by the labels but by the actual basic presentation of the forms. That the assumption is false becomes apparent from, for example,

5. I was giving a lecture yesterday.
today. (said in the morning)
today. (said in the evening)
tomorrow.

6. John comes to my office on Fridays these days.
tomorrow.
yesterday, and what does he see ...

7. I had a car all last year.
If I had a car now ...
Provided I had a car next month ...

Indeed, in the English of today it would be difficult to find a finite verb form which could not appear in statements referring to all time spheres: present past and future. (This is not invalidated by arguments that past tense forms in future/present time contexts signal not past time but unreality, and that present tense forms are used in past time contexts for psychological reasons). This invites the conclusion that if, sensu stricto, tense is a grammatical expression of time references incorporated in verb forms, then English has become a tenseless language; for if its finite verb forms can indicate all times, they can safely be said to indicate none of them at all. The supposition that English finite verb forms are not markers of time is further reinforced by the fact that they can all appear in statements whose truth is valid for all times of interest and in statements which present a logical connection between two propositions and are therefore equally timeless.

e.g., 8. Four times four makes sixteen.

9. He knows a lot who has read a lot.

10. Cats can be dangerous.

11. Without the Sun there would be no life on Earth.

12. The Earth is spinning on its axis more slowly every day.

There appear to be some grounds for speculating that the notion of time is introduced solely by the context and the factual knowledge of the speaker, and that the meaning signalled by the forms is compatible with all time references. It is now an accepted view that there is no future tense in English: instead one talks only of the ways of expressing futurity. In the light of existing evidence I venture to suggest, tentatively, that there are also no present or past tenses, but only ways of expressing present and past.

Disregarding the concord element, the surface structure of a finite verbal group in English may be composed of the verb base alone or of the verb base with any number of the 5 phonologically manifested lexical-verb modifiers: 'be-n', 'be-ing', have-n', 'm' (modal), and 'd' ("past tense" morpheme). Each modifier clearly divides the 32 possible verbal groups into two groups of 16, one group being characterised by the modifier's presence and the other by its absence. This means that the modifiers must serve to bring about the contrast in meaning between the verbal groups.[5]

Since the modifiers produce the contrast in meaning they must be carriers of meaning themselves.

The contrast of meaning thus produced is between the presence of a given modifier and its absence. Since the absence of a given modifier is semantically significant, the number of elements of meaning, other than the lexical meaning of the verb base, which can enter the semantic structure of a finite verbal group is not five but ten. Not all of them, however, are co-occurent: the semantic component carried by a given modifier always stands in a binary opposition to the semantic component brought about by the absence of that modifier. From this it follows that the semantic structure of each of the finite verbal groups is always composed of six elements of meaning.

The Binary Opposition BE-ING -- 0_1

The BE-ING Modifier

The BE-ING modifier has aspectual significance in that it signals that the event is viewed analytically. The basic semantic component of BE-ING (i.e., that element of meaning which is common to all its occurrences regardless of the verbal and situational context) reads: the event designated by the lexical verb is in the process of taking place.

Examples:

13. John is smoking his pipe.
14. Bobby is being a lion in a cage.
15. I was walking down the road this morning when a black cat crossed my path.
16. This time next month I will be sun-bathing in Majorca.
17. Dad has been painting all day.

As A. Ota (1963) observes, this process means "that the event has already started and that it is now moving towards a completion but has not come to the completion yet. Thus the process involves movement. It involves unceasing development of the action (the event) towards a completion. Thus it is dynamic." For this reason the modifier marks the event which is/was/has been/will be occurring, and presents that event in exactly the same way as it would be presented in a moving picture. BE-ING, whose meaning is axiomatic to the native speaker of English, is a grammatical device to make all verbs dynamic.

This is particularly apparent in the case where BE-ING modifies a lexical verb denoting a state:

18. She is having a headache again. (pretending)

19. Dad was being a General yesterday. (acting)

20. This house will be costing us £10,000 per year. (causing us to pay)

21. She is resembling her mother more and more. (becoming similar)

22. Ted has been seeing things lately. (imagining)

In spite of widely different paraphrasing, each of the above lexical verbs: have, be, cost, resemble, and see retains its basic meaning. For example, in 'be seeing things' a perception of seeing is present, only that that perception is the result of a mental activity performed and not of a passively received image, which it is in the case of 'see things'.
In 20 , the basic meaning of 'cost' is also present, for it is the cost of the house that the person will have to pay. A person who is 'being a General' behaves as if he were a real-life General, and in this sense he 'is' a General at the time referred to. In this case 'being' is the result of a particular activity. The same is true for 'have' in 18.

In English the evidence shows that both dynamic and stative verbs can be used with the analytic aspect whenever the speaker wishes, and his factual knowledge of how things happen in this world allows him, to refer to some kind of event in the process of taking place. (In the case of verbs of state this event either becomes a mental activity:

23. He is always seeing white elephants after a few drinks; or is a change of some sort:

24. The goulash is tasting better and better; or allows a change of some sort:

25. I am liking my work.

26. I am hoping that ...

These are non-commital, tentative espressions which signal that the speaker has not made up his mind and so a change is possible). If there are verbs which are never used with the analytic aspect, it is not because this would be wrong linguistically but rather because an appropriate context of situation does not occur in reality, i.e., has not yet been institutionalised.[3]

Presenting an event in the process of taking place has its logical implications. For instance, because the beginning and the end of the event are not communicated[4], the event being viewed from within (Comrie, 1975), it is understood that the event must have begun some time before and has not yet ceased. This implies duration in time. Juxtaposed with another event that is not viewed analytically, and is therefore "deprived" of duration, this will produce the effect of a temporal frame[5], e.g.,

27. He always phones me when I am eating my dinner.

But the relative duration becomes apparent only when the two events are in juxtaposition. Otherwise it is possible (a) for events with considerable duration to be referred to by verbal groups lacking BE-ING, e.g.,

28. I study Economics.

and (b) for events with shorter duration to be referred to by verbal groups in which BE-ING is present, e.g.,

29. I am doing my homework now.

This in turn shows that BE-ING is not a marker of a longer time; the relative duration can only be implied by the correct handling of the two grammatical devices, BE-ING and its corresponding O_1, together.

The process also suggests continuity, although continuity itself is not a basic difference between verbal groups with and without BE-ING:

cf 30. I write books.

31. I am writing a book.

The difference between these lies in what is being continued. In 30, the reference is to a succession of several books written consecutively. In 31, this succession concerns only sessions in the writing of one and the same book. This is made apparent by the singular a book and the fact that the writing of it is said to be in the process of taking place. That this process is not continuous is evident from either the lack of a perceivable context, viz., the person is not writing at the moment of speaking, or, if the perceivable context is present, from the slight possibility of a book being written in just one session.

This factual knowledge of how things happen in the world and, more often than not, the co-text and context of situation are, in my view, the main source for the interpretation as referring to habit lasting over a limited period of time of sentences like:

32. I am going to work by bus this week.

33. We are going abroad more and more these days.

34. I am living in France now.

That is to say, the time is shown to be limited by an adverbial specification of the length of time: this week, these days, or even now (as opposed to then or always). Without this specification, the statements are more likely to indicate specific, instantaneous occasions:

cf. 35. I am going to work by bus.

36. We are going abroad.

If 'going to work by bus' and 'going abroad' do not take place at the moment of speaking, the above sentences will imply the question 'When?'.
The answer to this question, however, does not necessarily have to be, e.g., 'these days'; instead it may be, e.g., 'tomorrow' or 'on Monday'.
From this it follows that BE-ING in itself is not a marker of habit over a limited period of time. That the reference is made to an habitual event is, in the majority of cases, established by the context of situation. Needless to say, statements like 32, 33, or 34 hardly ever occur in isolation. Rather, they are part of a larger utterance, or of a dialogue, concerning a definite subject matter, say: one's normal mode of transport to work.

Factual knowledge comes in to the consideration of the examples:

37. (a) I feel ill.
(b) I am feeling ill.

38. (a) I live in Paris.
(b) I am living in Paris (for the time being).

Clearly, the sentences in 37 stand almost in free variation, both indicating a temporary event; in 38 the sentences stand in contrast, (a) indicating a permanent event and (b) a temporary event. The explanation is to be sought in the referential meanings given: 'feeling ill', as we know, will normally refer to a temporary state, while 'living' will refer to a permanent state. So in 37 (a) the sense of permanence which the absence of BE-ING should imply is lost, but in 38 (a) it remains. It is important to note that while the absense of BE-ING implies a sense of permanence, its presence logically implies a sense of temporariness: the modifier itself means event in process, and this suggests movement (towards a completion of that event). This movement is shown to be limited to a definite period of time either by adverbials (which do not have to occur in the same sentence: they may be farther away in the context), or by the referential meaning of the verb used. Beyond the limiting points thus defined the movement is understood to cease. But if the limiting points are not introduced in either of the above-mentioned ways, the event will be

perceived ... perpetually going on:

39. The Earth is moving round the Sun.

Therefore, to say that BE-ING in itself is the carrier of the meaning of limited duration is to deprive context of all its important significance.

The final feature equally well derived from the notion of process is the possibility of the interpretation of the meaning of verbal groups with BE-ING in terms of the probability of validity of the predication. In this interpretation, the predication is understood to be completely valid for the time referred to, with the validity diminishing smoothly in both time-directions into either perfect falsity or irrelevance, which time is marked by the actor doing nothing or doing something else (Joos, 1964). In other words, the probability of validity of the predication lasts as long as the event itself. (Thus it is not surprising that the probability diminishes with time). Consequently, a diminishing validity of probability should be seen only as a logical derivation from the fact that the event referred to is presented in the process of taking place. So, being only a derivative, the probabilistic theory on its own does not appear to be sufficient reason for using verbs denoting states with the BE-ING modifier.

Verbal groups lacking BE-ING.

The absence of BE-ING from a verbal group is semantically significant. The choice of O_1 from the binary opposition BE-ING-O_1, results in a verbal group acquiring an aspectual meaning which is that of viewing an event synoptically, i.e., as a complete whole.

40. I ate a big breakfast today.

41. I plead 'Not guilty'.

42. Bats hunt by night.

43. My husband has been a football-fan all his life.

44. Mary will have her results tomorrow.

The speaker's choice has its consequences: when he decides to view a given event synoptically, or from without, as Comrie (1975) suggests, he no longer presents that event as occurring, but instead he marks only the existence of the referent, be it a state or an activity. The length of this existence can be referred only from the lexical meaning of the verb used and its contextual and situational environment.

ii

cf. 45. I name this ship 'King Batory'. (one instance)

46. Jim visited his aunt every week last year. (one year)

47. Mary walks 3 miles to school. (presumably over the period of her attendance at school)

48. Our Physics teacher explained yesterday that nothing travelled faster than light. (infinite time)

The semantic division of verbs into stative verbs and dynamic verbs is not at all significant with regard to the synoptic aspect - both kinds of verb are equally capable of being used with it. One may go further and say that while the analytic aspect is a grammatical device to make all verbs dynamic, the synoptic aspect, by way of contrast, is a grammatical device to make all verbs static. This is very difficult to grasp, I believe, especially for the native speaker of English, to whom the semantic component introduced into a verbal group by the absence of BE-ING is again axiomatic. He will always think in terms of the referential meaning of the verb base rather than the grammatical implications of the form. (E.g., that 'I know Jane' is a state and 'I swim in summer' is a repeated activity can only be inferred from the referents and is not because of the verb form used). Thus the simple analogy between the structure and a photograph or photographic slide may be helpful: both are static and both involve no movement. As Ota (1963) observes, "In 'I hear the bell ring (at six every morning)' the bell is not in the process of ringing. what is said is the fact of the ringing of the bell". This fact-stating function is true for all occurrences of the synoptic aspect.

The synoptic aspect in itself is not the marker of repetition (= habit), instantaneousness or general truths: such interpretations are conditioned first of all by the context (which includes lexical meaning of the verb base). For example, in

49. I see a ship ; can you see it ?

the reference is made to an instantaneous event. But when 'see a ship' appears in an utterance like

50. Every day, as I drive home by the docks, I see a ship being unloaded.

the event is understood as repeated, and hence habitual.

What remains unchanged is the synoptic viewing of the event. An adverbial specification is often responsible for decoding the referent as habitual. Obvious examples are 'frequently', 'often', etc., but consider the following statements:

51. I will go to school next year. (habit)

52. I will go to school tomorrow , (instantaneous event)

Knowledge of the referents is also important:

cf.51. I will go to school next year. (habit)

53. I will be introduced to Dr. Jones next year. (instantaneous event)

Here, in the absence of contextual clues pointing to the contrary, 'going to school' is perceived as a habitual event and 'being introduced to a given person' as an event which occurs once. Now compare:

54. He led a busy social life in 1973. (habit)

55. He lost his wife in 1973. (instantaneous event)

Here the two verbal groups share the same form, so the difference in implication cannot and should not be attributed to the form. That synoptic aspect per se does not mark repetition is further evidenced by

56.I am dining with my aunt all week.

where the analytic aspect has been chosen to refer to a habitual event.

Another point is that repetition and instantaneousness can be discussed only in the case of dynamic verbs,

57. I live in Canada.

58. I ride a bicycle during the summer.

which is precisely where the lexical meaning of the verb comes in. The context of situation, e.g., a commentary or the demonstration of an electrical gadget, is sufficient reason alone for interpreting the events referred to as single events.

The synoptic aspect has a characterising function in all cases bar performative utterances (Joos, 1964).

For example,

59. I pronounce you man and wife.

45. I name this ship 'King Batory'.

The only difference between these is again the context of situation. A performative utterance is not intended to report or to describe anything. Instead, "the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as saying something ... [and] it is always necessary that the circumstances in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, appropriate, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should also perform other actions, whether 'physical' or 'mental' actions or even acts of uttering further words. Thus for naming the ship, it is essential that I should be the person appointed to name her and it is hardly a gift if I say 'I give it to you' but never hand it over" (J.L. Austen , 1962)

The reason why the synoptic aspect is the only possible choice in the case of a performative utterance lies in the fact that the beginning and end of the performance of the act fall well within the time of the utterance itself. It would therefore be inappropriate to present the act in the process of taking place, as this would necessarily suggest that the act must have begun before the moment of speaking and will extend some time into the future. This does not, however, preclude the use with the analytic aspect of verbs such as 'name', 'pronounce (somebody man and wife)', etc., since both aspects are possible outside the fixed context of situation described above,

cf. 60. Tomorrow I will pronounce you man and wife.
61. He is now pronouncing them man and wife.

Lastly, the choice of aspect often depends on the desirability or undesirability of overtones of duration and incompletion brought about by the meaning of BE-ING. This is most apparent in utterances referring to the past,

cf. 62. I was typing my article yesterday.

63. I typed my article yesterday.

Taken in isolation, 63 suggests the entire article was typed, whereas 62 shows the actor in the middle of the event and hence implies incompletion.

cf. 64. I repaired my car last Sunday.

65. I lived in this town in 1964.

Here the type of lexical verb has a powerful influence on the two implications. 64 will invariably mean that the car is now repaired, because the element of completion is inherent in the meaning of 'repair'. 65 seemingly requires a longer context in order to decide whether the referent is or is not completed. Like duration, completion/incompletion is only an overtone of the meaning of the BE-ING modifier (or of the modifier's absence). For it is not possible to tell from

66. I was baking bread when the Browns' arrived.

whether the bread is now baked, and

67. I have grown tomatoes for 20 years.

does not necessarily mean that the 'growing of tomatoes' has come to an end.

Notes.

1. G. Leech, J. Svartvik, A Communicative Grammar of English,/ London, 1975/, p.64.

2. R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, and J. Svartvik, A Grammar of Contemporary English,/London , 1972; 4th Imp.1974/, p.86.

3. Verbs denoting states occur less frequently with the analytic aspect than with the synoptic aspect only because of the different frequencies of occurrence of the referents, not because of the comparative appropriateness, or correctness of the two aspects.

   Note also that with respect to verbs of state the aspect in English most often specifies the nature of the event. This is so because the aspect chosen when referring to such an event is determined by the event's nature, be it a state or an activity.

4. English has no grammatical device for communicating the beginning and the end of an event, so hence the necessity of using lexical verbs such as start, begin, finish, stop, end, etc.

5. For this same reason, the events in the background are viewed analytically whereas those which advance the plot are not (Joos, 1964): the plot-advancing events give an impression of occurring successively in the time-span needed for the background events to be completed. E.g.,

   68. While Mary was shopping, Jane washed the curtains, cleaned the windows and prepared dinner.

   Note the importance of while as a contextual clue.

6. Note also the choice of the synoptic aspect in commentaries on fast-moving sports such as football and horse-racing.

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